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ABSTRACT

Service-learning is a teaching strategy used by Texas middle schools that combines classroom learning with community activities and where both students and teachers plan activities and projects that meet a well defined school or community need. These activities strengthen academic learning by addressing learning objectives, allowing students to design and participate in community projects, and providing students with opportunities to reflect on their individual involvement in learning and serving. The aim of service-learning is essentially to help students increase their academic skills through understanding how what they learn in school can be applied to the real world. The Federal National and Community Service Act of 1990 created a Corporation for National and Community Service in 1993. The Corporation brought many volunteer organizations together to promote the idea of life-long service. Learn and Serve America, one of the Corporation's programs, serves to enlighten educators about service-learning and trains them in how to establish school-community partnerships. Service-learning is a powerful teaching tool that can be used to link education to real community problems and to allow for active student participation and reflection in both the school and community. (Contains seven references.) (Author/CR)

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Running Head: SERVICE-LEARNING, AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGY

Service-Learning, an Effective Teaching Strategy for Texas Middle Schools

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Abstract

This paper examines service-learning as an effective teaching strategy in Texas middle schools. It reviews service-learning with respect the student, curriculum, and society. It also explores how service-learning can address two of the goals set by the Texas Task Force on Middle School Education for Texas middle schools. In the end, this paper finds that service learning is a powerful teaching tool that can be used in Texas middle schools to link education to real community problems and to allow for active student participation and reflection in both the school and community.

Service-Learning, an Effective Teaching Strategy for Texas Middle Schools

Is service-learning an effective teaching tool that has a role in Texas middle schools? In exploring this question, service-learning must be defined. Service-learning is a teaching strategy that combines classroom learning to community activities where both students and teachers plan activities and projects that meet "a well identified school or community need" (Close Up Foundation, 1996, p. 11). These activities and projects strengthen academic learning by addressing learning objectives, allowing students to design and participate in community projects, and providing students with opportunities to reflect on their individual involvement in learning and serving. The aim of service-learning is essentially "to help students increase their academic skills through understanding how what they learn in school can be applied to the real world" (Corporation for National Service, 1997, p. 1). The Federal National and Community Service Act of 1990 created a Corporation for National and Community Service in 1993. The Corporation brought many volunteer organizations together to promote the idea of life-long service. Learn and Serve America,

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which is one of the Corporation's programs, serves to train educators about service-learning and how to establish school-community partnerships (Stephens, 1995).

Key Issues in Service-Learning

Student Involvement

In developing a service-learning project, students are involved in the planning because they have direct links to the community that they will be serving (Close Up Foundation, 1996). When students are involved at the very beginning of the work, they feel that the project really belongs to them. No matter if the work involves tutoring children, caring for senior citizens, or planting gardens, students know that their community trusts them to complete all of the project work (ASLER, 1995). This trust between the students, the school, and the community is essential in a service-learning relationship. The community benefits from the student work. The school gets a positive image, and more importantly, students get the opportunity to prove to their community that they are valuable, productive citizens. Hence, service-learning establishes real meaning in the learning for students and helps to build self-esteem and self-worth in all students.

Community Needs

The service-learning project must meet a real community need and support the learning objectives of the school (Close Up Foundation, 1996). Students are crucial to developing the service learning project because they define what their community is. They decide whether their community will be a vacant lot across the street, their immediate school, or the surrounding neighborhood and determine what improvement needs to be made (Stephens, 1995). Once the definition of community and the selection of a project have been made, ongoing collaboration between the school and community occurs so that each

entity can provide the students with opportunities to use their academic knowledge in the real world. Most importantly, during this process, educators give students time to reflect during the different stages of the service learning project. In this manner, students have time to think, talk, and write about what happenings are going well, what actions need to be taken to improve a particular situation, how the academic lessons are empowering them to better serve their community, and so forth (ASLER, 1995).

Curriculum

In many elementary and middle schools, teachers approach service-learning as a thematic or interdisciplinary approach (Wade, 1997). This is an important strategy because it shows students how the different subject areas can work together to solve a problem and that knowledge in all areas is necessary and applicable. In a thematic approach, each discipline can focus on certain aspects of the service. For example, if the service-learning project focused on cleaning up the graffiti around a school, each subject area can tackle different areas of the issue. Social studies can address current laws aimed at stopping graffiti and whether these laws really work. Science can consider some of the psychological issues behind graffiti. Why do some people feel the need to tag? Is tagging addictive? In language arts, students can read about juvenile crimes. They can write about their own experiences with tagging or interview other people involved in tagging. In addition, they can brainstorm ideas about stopping graffiti and setting up alternative activities for teenagers. As evident, service-learning projects can branch out into multiple activities for all content areas, but essentially, the curriculum is based on student interests, incorporates interdisciplinary or thematic learning, and has real life applications.

Texas Middle School Goals

In its report to Texas middle schools, the Task Force on Middle School Education outlined nine goals that "promote widespread implementation of the recommendations contained in Turning Points" (TEA, 1991, p. vii). Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century was published in 1989 by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. It made recommendations for making education more developmentally appropriate for students in the middle grades (Carnegie Corporation, 1997). For the purposes of this paper, the first two of the goals written by the Texas Task Force on Middle School Education, which focus on the students and curriculum, are examined with respect to service-learning.

Student Learning

The first goal of the Texas Task Force on Middle School Education is student learning. For this goal, the task force states "the instructional setting that best meets the needs of middle grade students and teachers is one that brings together a heterogeneous group of students and an interdisciplinary team of teachers" (TEA, 1991, p. 9). In this setting, students of varying academic abilities all work and perform together in heterogeneous classes. In addition, teams of teachers share the same groups of students. The teachers on each team teach English language arts, reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. In effect, this strategy helps to "foster small communities of learning" (TEA, 1991, p. 9) among the teachers and students.

Service-learning addresses the issues in this goal in several ways. Service-learning is a teaching strategy that can be implemented by all teachers for all of their students. This teaching strategy is not reserved for one group: "All are involved; all can serve"

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(Stephens, 1995, p. 11). In addition, service-learning promotes the idea of interdisciplinary units because it enables students to realize that their core subjects are integrated. Finally, service-learning also recognizes the need for teaming. Teams give teachers and students a sense of community within the school; service-learning involves students defining and helping their community. Essentially, school teams provide students with the prior knowledge that they will need in order to define the community that they want to serve.

Curriculum and Programs

In regard to curriculum and programs, the Texas Task Force on Middle School Education recommends "developmentally appropriate instruction" (TEA, 1991, p. 19) suited to the both academic needs and interests of the students. Teachers are "facilitators of knowledge" (TEA, 1991, p. 19) who encourage students to actively participate in discussions, ask questions, and choose options. Since the curriculum is integrated, students can use the knowledge that they acquire in one class to help them understand the ideas being taught in the other classes. By demonstrating this action, students show that they are developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The content of the curriculum should address multicultural issues and topics such as drug-use (including alcohol and tobacco), sex (including HIV/AIDS education), and pregnancy. In addition, students should have the opportunities to raise their self-esteem and increase their social responsibilities through small advisory group programs and to become active citizens through youth service programs (TEA, 1991).

Service-learning also addresses the issues of this goal in many ways. As ASLER (1995) points out, "learning goals--knowledge, skills, attitudes--must be compatible with the developmental level of the young person" (p. 5). The content of the curriculum can address

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topics like drugs and sex if the students decide these are areas that they wish to explore. The learning is reinforced when students apply their academic knowledge to real life situations. For example, a middle school team could perform a skit on the pressures kids face to take drugs, publish a brochure that lists the side affects of certain drugs, and so forth. In projects such as these, teachers are responsible for facilitating the learning and the serving so that all students have the opportunity to be active learners. During the process, students can use the advisory period to reflect on what they are learning, how they feel about the status of the project, and so forth.

Discussion

At the beginning of this paper the question was asked if service-learning is an effective teaching tool that has a role in Texas middle schools? The answer is yes. In service-learning, students' interests are important to schools. Once educators learn the interests of their students, they integrate these interests within the curriculum. The materials can be continuously adapted to challenge students in developing their critical thinking skills. The curriculum is thematic so that the knowledge of each subject is integrated. Students see the connection between their classes. More importantly, students transfer their learning to real life situations, which validates their learning. Based on the first two goals written by the Texas Task Force on Middle School education, Texas middle schools are clearly in a position to adopt service-learning as a powerful teaching strategy. In fact, some Texas middle schools are already implementing service learning in their curriculums. The Close Up Foundation recently trained several middle school teachers in the El Paso Independent School District in 1996 and teachers in the Canutillo Independent School District in 1997 in service-learning. The Close Up Foundation hopes

that service-learning trained teachers will eventually show other educators how to implement service-learning in their curriculums. If service-learning is to become an integral part of Texas middle school curriculums, this action is obviously needed.

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